
Radford Program Reduces Barriers to Substance Abuse Treatment

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Prior to the establishment of the Radford Program, many offenders in Henrico County, Virginia, fell through the gaps and were lost within the system. Offenders' overall "show rate" for their first appointments for mandated substance abuse services was only 48%—keep in mind that these people were ordered to receive services. Many persons mandated to receive treatment complained about the location of the Mental Health Center, which is miles from both the State Probation and Parole office and the community corrections office and is not accessible by public transportation. The separate and distant locations provided barriers (and excuses) for offenders already disinclined to keep an appointment.

In an effort to serve some of these offenders better, substance abuse education groups recently had been established on-site in both the State Probation and Parole office (serving primarily felony cases) and the Henrico Community Corrections office (serving primarily misdemeanants). Though they were limited to one education group per week at each site, this experience showed that locating the treatment service close to the referral source led to significantly higher show rates and rates of successful completion. The Radford Program expanded on this evolving inter-agency partnership and the co-location of services.

Establishing the Program

The Radford Program is an extension of existing services offered by the Henrico Area Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services. It was established to reduce barriers in accessing treatment for criminal justice referrals. Many offenders in the Henrico County Community Corrections Program (HCCP) are required to complete a substance abuse evaluation and treatment.

The program is physically located in the same building as the local district probation and parole office on Radford Avenue. This location is near a bus line. As one aspect of its closer working relationship with HCCP, the Mental Health Center provides two offices at the Radford location, which serve as full-time office space for county probation officers.

Key stakeholders, including HCCP and the state probation and parole office, provided input into the development of the Radford Program. Substance Abuse Services staff held a series of meetings with staff from these agencies and identified the central needs to address:

- ◆ Making treatment more accessible for offenders;

- ◆ Closing the communication gap;
- ◆ Reducing the length of time an offender must wait for an appointment; and
- ◆ Becoming more familiar with the work of all the agencies involved.

Treatment Approaches and Coordination

The program uses an abstinence-based approach, believing that it is important for participants to take time out from their lifestyles to determine if they need to make changes in their alcohol or drug use. Many do not have a goal of stopping their use, and this is ultimately their choice. The courts reinforce abstinence with orders for offenders to remain drug free and to be monitored through urine testing.

The treatment program consists of several phases, or options. Participants are referred to an orientation to the program, which is available twice weekly. From there they are referred for an evaluation, which results in treatment recommendations. Offenders are evaluated on their “readiness to change level,” which is then used to determine where to place them in the program. A wide range of services is available, from medical detoxification to outpatient counseling. The services actually provided at the Radford location include individual and group therapy, education groups, support groups (AA/NA meetings), auricular detoxification acupuncture, urine drug screening, and childcare in support of participants with this need. Many of the staff are trained and certified as Auricular Detoxification Specialists. Specialized services for women were added recently, through additional funding for this purpose.

Education groups and treatment groups are time-limited. Many participants do not need services beyond the education component and can complete the whole package (evaluation, group, and follow-up screening) in less than 3 months. For those with a more serious problem, treatment is designed to last up to 1 year. This is considered an optimal length of time to begin to make changes and then have time to continue to receive the support of the program.

At weekly meetings, staff review the progress on each case, and there is direct communication with the referral sources. Because probation and parole and HCCP staff are on-site, it is very easy for the treatment staff to communicate directly and quickly. In many situations, the offender is involved in discussions

Profile: Radford Program, Henrico County (Richmond), Virginia

Partner agencies:

Henrico Area Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services
 Henrico County Community Corrections
 Commonwealth of Virginia District 32 Probation and Parole Office
 Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services

Purpose:

The partnership facilitates the operation of an outpatient substance abuse treatment facility specifically designed to meet the needs of the adult criminal justice population. By reducing barriers to treatment and better coordinating the efforts of the criminal justice system and treatment providers, the partner agencies seek to improve both public safety and the individual participant's level of functioning.

Launched: 1999

between the staff of the corrections and treatment agencies, so there is no question about what is expected. The model used considers the referral source, the treatment provider, and the offender as all having an investment in a successful outcome. Communication and agreement on the goals of treatment are keys to the success of this program.

Use of Technology

As part of the move to the new location on Radford Avenue, the offices were equipped with a networked system of computers. This hardware allowed the move away from the main Mental Health Center to be almost seamless. The Radford staff can access information and communicate easily with all other agency staff.

The move to Radford also presented a unique opportunity for data collection. All referrals to this new program have been tracked on a spreadsheet, and since the participants at Radford are not mixed in with those of the larger mental health system, the data are clean. This has been very helpful in terms of tracking numbers of participants and related information. In addition, the computer system allows the Radford staff to use a networked version of a statewide assessment tool, the Addiction Severity Index. This instrument has a comprehensive report-writing feature, with options for generating specific reports for court hearings. Virginia law requires completion of the ASI for certain probationers, so the technology is shared among the key stakeholders.

Program Resources

The Radford Program uses existing staff relocated from the county's main mental health center, so the original Substance Abuse Services budget covers personnel costs. New costs have been mostly associated with leasing the office space and operating a free-standing facility, including one-time expenses for purchasing office equipment and furniture. In addition, there has been an increased cost related to the supplies for the acupuncture material. All additional expenses were covered through a reallocation of existing funds within the mental health agency's budget.

One clinical supervisor, two office assistants, six full-time clinicians, one half-time clinician, and one case manager currently staff the Radford Program, and the State Department of Rehabilitative Services has funded a full-time vocational counselor for the program. This is an important addition to the services offered, as research strongly indicates that employment is a key issue in the support of recovery from addiction.

By being located on-site with the state's district probation and parole office, the Radford Program is able to receive some direct payment from the state for services "not otherwise available in the community." The program has gained an important advantage by focusing on the criminal justice population, as there is a major initiative in the Commonwealth of Virginia to direct money towards substance abuse services for this group.

Successes of the Program

The Radford Program quickly exceeded its first-year objectives. An increase of 100 referrals was anticipated from HCCP and the state probation and parole office, but in the first 12 months of operation, there were a total of 335 referrals from those agencies. Referrals have continued to increase. The overall show rate for the first appointment is now around 75%, a significant improvement from the previous rate of 48%. In addition, there has been a faster turn-around time in getting offenders in for their initial appointments. The average time to wait for an orientation is now less than 3 days, and most evaluations are offered within a week to 10 days from that point. There is no question that the change of location, as well as a closer partnership with the primary referral sources, has made a significant impact.

The program has noted significant results from its use of auricular detoxification acupuncture, implemented as a core component of the treatment process. All participants are encouraged to make use of this service, and those in the treatment groups are required to attend an acupuncture group immediately preceding the treatment group. (They are not required to have the acupuncture treatment, but they must sit in with the group.) Results show that participants are much more focused, the groups are staying full, and participants report they have something that truly benefits them in ways traditional therapy cannot. Acupuncture has made a strong impact on the overall program, for very little cost.

Another positive result of this program is that the Henrico County judges have become more interested in the treatment services. This is a direct result of the improved communication between the treatment providers and the referral sources. It has helped to open up dialog with the courts, allowing the treatment providers to better understand what the court expects and for treatment providers to educate the courts about what is possible.

Because the effort to improve communication with referring agencies and expand services began gradually several years ago, initial barriers to change were overcome without great uproar. The timing for relocating the substance abuse services was good, because staff resistance to moving program offices had lessened with the increasingly crowded conditions at the main mental health center. Pressure from other agency programs that needed office space at the main center added support for signing the lease and making the move.

The Radford Program has grown quickly in 2 years of operation. It is actually the result of several years of talking, hoping, and dreaming about what the "best way to do it" would look like. The fortuitous availability of an office suite in the Probation and Parole building on Radford Avenue let those dreams become real. Substance-abusing offenders are often a difficult population to treat, but they are the very folks who need the most creative, supportive programming. The Mental Health Center has long enjoyed good working relationships with HCCP and State Probation and Parole, and the Radford Program has served to make those connections even stronger. ■

For more information:

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